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Facts about Fiddles

LINS, OLD & NEW

BY

JOHN BROADHOUSE.

THIRD EDITION,

ENLARGED.

LONDON:

REEVES, 185, FLEET STREET, E.C.

Office of "The Musical Standard."



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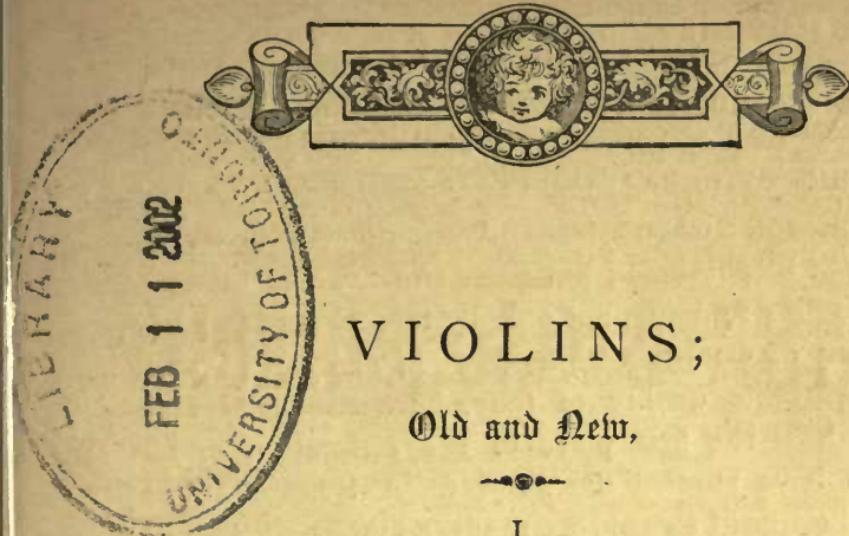
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I.

ABOUT no musical instrument has so much been written, so much enthusiasm excited, so much information desired, and, we are obliged to add, so much nonsense talked and printed, as about the violin. The tone of a good violin is so wonderfully sympathetic, and in the hands of a master it is capable of such surprising effects, that a well-executed violin solo, with any kind of audience, will, to a certainty, "bring down the house" more effectually than any other performance. To explain why this is so is not our purpose here, though the fact will we think be admitted. Knowing how much depends upon the quality of the particular violin played upon, artists are careful to procure whenever possible a violin made in Italy by one of the most renowned makers of the end of the 17th or

beginning of the 18th centuries—a STRADIVARIUS or GUARNERIUS, for besides these there are only one or two makers whose violins are considered really first-rate, and sought after accordingly. Others are accepted when a STRADIVARIUS or GUARNERIUS cannot be obtained ; but these two are the makers whose instruments, not only by report, but by sheer beauty of workmanship and wonderfully pure and sympathetic quality of tone, have long held and still hold the first place in the estimation of all who have studied the subject. A STRADIVARIUS has been sold for nearly a thousand pounds. SPOHR and PAGANINI played on instruments made by GUARNERIUS ; WILHELMJ and REMENYI both use instruments by the first-named celebrated Cremonese maker. These particular instruments, if sold, would fetch fabulous prices, not simply because they had been so long used by great men—though that would doubtless increase the price offered—but because they are the grandest specimens of this most wonderful instrument, made by the two men who reached the highest point of excellence in violin-making. The cost of an elaborate grand pianoforte, of the highest quality, would not be enough to buy a genuine “STRAD.” of the best period, and a fine organ of very fair proportions could be built for the money which has actually been paid for one of the best violins made in the workshop of JOSEPH GUARNERIUS at Cremona.

Why is this ? Had these makers a secret which no others had, which has been lost with them, and which no modern ingenuity or research can discover ? There are those who say " Yes " without doubt or hesitation, but that is not our opinion. We believe that the violins of Cremona have attained their excellency, not from age, but because after years of study, STRADIVARIUS and GUARNERIUS produced violins of a certain shape, made with woods of definite quality and grain, and varnished with varnish of a peculiar kind—though this last item is not by any means of such transcendent importance as some are disposed to think. The violin once made, constant use develops its qualities and perfects its tone ; but even this item of " constant use " can be compensated for ; and OTTO, a German maker, wrote a book in which he stated that by sawing away with a tight and heavy bow on the various semitones of the finger-board, the effect of a century of ordinary use could be produced in three months by those who were willing to undergo the necessary " daily grind," and he offered to perfect violins in this way in his own workshop. The problem to be solved is : Given the precise quality and grain of wood, care in making, and ingredients of varnish, can a modern maker produce a violin equal to those of STRADIVARIUS or GUARNERIUS ? We answer, " Yes," without fear of sustaining contradiction. The *New York Music Trade Review*, quoting recently from a

contemporary, puts the case clearly thus:—"Now
"why should NICHOLAS AMATI, JOSEPH GUAR-
"NERIUS, GIO. PAOLO MAGGINI, GASPAR DI SALO,
"STEINER, or ANTONIUS STRADIVARIUS, of Cre-
'mona, Brescia, Absom, or elsewhere, who all worked
"at the close of the seventeenth and beginning of the
"eighteenth century, have produced violins which are
"so excellent of their kind? What is the reason why
"an Italian instrument cannot be repeated exactly
"as to shape and material, so that to-day a violin
"so constructed should give forth the same sweetness,
"purity, and volume of sound? To the first question
"the same reply could be given as that furnished by
"the painter who, when asked 'how he mixed his
"colours?' answered simply 'with brains.' In re-
"sponding to the second question—one of mechanical
"execution simply, it would seem manifest that, with
"the rapid advance we have made in tools and instru-
"ments of precision, to acknowledge that we had not
"the imitative faculty would be to deny the manu-
"facturing progress made in this century. . . It
"passes human comprehension to believe that an
"instrument made out of the simplest of all mate-
"rials, wood, by Italian or German *luthiers* two cen-
"turies ago—violins which sang, laughed, screamed,
"sobbed, or moaned, should not be repeated by
"violin-makers to-day. There can be no secrets
"which thought, skill, and science cannot solve.
"There is but one single element, and that is the one

" of time, which is beyond our reach. Wines and
" violins want maturing ; but this mellowing which
" age gives has its limits. The culminating point
" when the supreme excellence of an alcoholic fluid
" is reached may be fixed. After that period, each
" moment is one of deterioration. With an instru-
" ment made of wood the same law must exist.
" We cannot say that the next century will diminish
" the strength or volume of tone in a Cremonese
" violin, but it is quite possible that the best violins
" of the old makers have reached their highest
" degree of excellence ; perhaps others of later make
" have not yet arrived at their maturity. Still, all
" this is merely speculative, and the advantages
" which age gives to violins are believed by many to
" be fanciful, or only appreciable in an old instru-
" ment by one listener in ten thousand."

We certainly think the marvellous qualities ascribed to age alone in a violin are altogether fanciful. Use may improve them, but not age without use. We believe there is a maker in London—an amateur maker, *mirabile dictu*—who has made violins which could not be distinguished by the tone from genuine Cremonas. We have seen and heard these violins, and could not distinguish the faintest difference between their tone and that of the finest "STRAD." America, too, is producing such violins. Readers of the *Musical Standard* will remember the article on "WILHELMJ'S

Violins"; and, it appears, WILHELMJ and REMENYI have both found out in America that violins equal in every respect to those of Cremona's best makers, can be made to-day. It would, indeed, be strange were it otherwise. What these two artists have said on the point is reported by the *Music Trade Review* of New York, and that journal, we think, is too respectable and reliable to have fabricated these reports. It says: "WILHELMJ very frankly gave the name of a "man whom he believed destined to be known as "one of the greatest violin makers that ever lived; "REMENYI was more mysterious, but said very "decidedly that the time was coming soon when we "should find that we had with us a man who would "rival the greatest masters of the art of violin "making. From what we can learn from other "sources, we believe that neither of these artists is "extravagant in his predictions. There are at least "two men who have revived the lost art of violin "making. One is GEMUNDER, so highly praised by "WILHELMJ; the name of the other we shall give in "our second article upon this subject. Which of "these was referred to by REMENYI we do not as "yet know. From what REMENYI said about the "violin, it will be gathered that he has little enthu- "siasm for the violin on account of age alone. True, "he used a "STRADIVARIUS; but why? Not because "he supposed that age alone has given it its superior "qualities, but because, with the exception of the

" GUARNERIUS violin, the STRADIVARIUS has had " no equal. As we understand him, the proposition " may be stated as follows: Let a man come forward " to-day who will make a violin equal to a STRADI- " VARIUS or a GUARNERIUS instrument, in all the " freshness and bloom of its youth, and the modern " violin will excel one by any other maker, however " remote the age in which he lived."

We have such a maker in London, too, though he is comparatively unknown. His violins are not in the market, and if they were, being English are modern, the market would despise them. But, for all that, they are as good in every way as the notable violins of Cremona.





II.

IT is necessary to remember that the market value of a violin and its intrinsic value are two very different things; and just as in case of a STRADIVARIUS or GUARNERIUS the market value has been raised [by scarcity to a fabulous] figure, so there are hundreds of instruments of first-class quality, which, if offered for sale, would fetch only a few pounds, simply because they are by makers whose names have never become famous. It is quite true that the two names we have just mentioned became famous solely on account of the sterling quality of their work; but it is equally true that violins have been made equal to those of Cremona, and between which and the Cremonese violins no possible difference beyond the name of the maker can be discerned, but which, at the same time, do not fetch one-tenth of the price of a "STRAD." or a "JOSEPH," and will not do so until their merits are more widely known. That the price of Cremona violins will decrease, and that of their modern equals increase, we think there can be no doubt. The

ardour of professional and amateur violinists in pursuit of Cremona instruments will cool somewhat when it is known—as it certainly will be, sooner or later—that they can buy for fifty pounds that which has hitherto cost five hundred. It will no doubt take a long time to convince some people that anything modern in the way of violins can be in every respect as good as that which is old; and so far as concerns those people who have more money than judgment it does not matter much whether they are convinced or not, for they will of course always believe, and act on the belief, that what costs most is worth most.

It is sheer nonsense to speak of these magnificent old Cremona violins as though their makers had some “secret” which died with them. If this is true at all, it is true only of the varnish, which is one of the least factors in the making of a good violin, and in this respect VUILLAUME of Paris and other makers claim to have recovered the lost art. In all other respects there can be, as the newspaper previously quoted observed, no secret which modern skill, ingenuity, and research cannot discover. Certain facts must be remembered, and to keep them in mind will much facilitate the consideration of the question. These axiomatic truths may be summarised as follows:—1. That age of itself does not improve the tone of a violin. 2. That the wood of which the belly and back of a violin are to be

constructed must be of a certain grain, density, and porosity, and that the use of wood of the best quality is not the result of a secret revealed to a few but of experiment and patient research. 3. That the shape of the two parts just mentioned materially influences the tone. 4. That STRADIVARIUS began with a high model, and experimented for forty years on the shape of the belly and back, gradually lowering his model, modifying his outline, and adopting the flat form. 5. That the flat model of STRADIVARIUS is that made by him in his matured years, gives out the finest tone, and is the most eagerly sought and highly prized by purchasers of his instruments. 6. That the violins of GUARNERIUS and the other makers who are held in the highest estimation next to the great STRADIVARIUS, are the most closely conformed to the best model (that is, the "flat" model) of the last-named maker. 7. That any maker who will make a violin of the same quality of wood, the same shape and thickness, the same beauty of workmanship, and the same kind of varnish as those of STRADIVARIUS, will, of necessity, equal the best instruments of that maker. 8. That the varnish is the only "secret" which is or is likely to be lost. 9. That the varnish is said by competent judges to influence the tone very slightly, and that on this point the best authorities are divided. 10. That in all other respects than the varnish, to imitate STRADIVARIUS is possible, and

that "copies" are made so accurately as to deceive all but the very best judges, and sometimes even them. II. That modern makers have made violins which neither in tone nor appearance can be distinguished from the best violins of Cremona, thus proving that, either with or without the supposed "lost secret" of the varnish, the tones of the best violins can be reproduced.

We have set out these statements categorically to secure clearness of reasoning. In these matters—as indeed in all matters which have to be proved—we must have cool precision. Let us cling tenaciously to established facts, and not be misled by wild but untenable statements; a fact will still be a fact though partisans may deny its existence. Of the magnificent tone of the best Cremonese instruments there is no question, and in advocating the claims of modern violins we have no desire to deprecate the beauties of older ones. Our point is, that this beauty of tone is due to natural causes, and was produced by means which are as well within the reach of modern makers as they were within the reach of STRADIVARIUS, GUARNERIUS, RUGGERIUS, or MAGGINI. Those makers arrived at the highest excellence simply by intelligent experiment, and with no other models before them than those which they evidently regarded as their own failures. It would, indeed, be passing strange if, *with the best models in their hands*, intelligent makers found it impossible to do to-day

what was done a hundred and fifty years ago without any good model at all. That there was genius in the question none can doubt; but it was the genius of patient, plodding, careful experiment, extending over many years, guided by known natural laws, and inspired by genuine enthusiasm for results without any regard for the amount of labour, time, or money expended in producing such results. This was the kind of genius which made the celebrated "STRADS." and "JOSEPHS." But is this genius quite extinct, and did it only exist once, and that in Italy? Does no Englishman, no American, no Frenchman, no German possess these fine qualities? To these questions only one reply is possible, and to argue that these violins cannot be equalled is to argue that their makers were more than human. On no other ground is it possible to contend that what they did others cannot do.

It is satisfactory to prove in theory that the closest imitation of the splendid Cremonese instruments is possible; but it is much more satisfactory to be able to say not merely that it can be done, but that it has been done, and of this we have no doubt at all. We shall, as a matter of course, be accused of writing up the works of some particular firm, but we may as well say at once that the gentleman to whom we refer as having equalled in England the violins of Italy is not a violin dealer, nor even a professed violin maker, and, so far as we know, has never sold one of the

magnificent violins of which he has made so many. He is certainly not aware that we are referring to him in illustration of our statements, unless he has accidentally recognised the allusion made in the former article. A more enthusiastic lover of the violin it has never been our pleasure to know, and we have known many. Fiddles are scattered about in almost every room in his house, and all of his own making. He has travelled far and wide to procure his wood, and paid high prices for it. One of his violins occupied considerably more than a year in making, and as he took that instrument from its velvet nest, he said to us, "No money would induce me to part with this, because no money could "replace it." In this opinion we agree with him. It is without hesitation, therefore, that we affirm our belief in the possibility of American makers producing violins equal to those of the best Cremonese makers, because we believe it has been done in England. Whether this opinion be accepted by others or not does not affect the issue; it is certainly our opinion, and we do not see why it should not be so. The Cremonas will still be as good in quality, though their equals may be made; but their price has, we think, reached its meridian, and will steadily decline when people are convinced—as they may be without much difficulty if they want to be—that violins equal to them have been made in London, Paris, or New York.



III.



FASHION and prejudice are strong opponents of the true and beautiful, whether in art, science, commerce, or religion; and we know not whether of the two is the stronger, the prejudice which prevents truth being accepted, or the fashion which sets up and perpetuates a false ideal. We think both prejudice and fashion have done a great deal of harm in connection with the most fascinating of all musical instruments—the violin.

Something more than a century and a half ago there lived in the city of Cremona a maker of fiddles, by name ANTONIO STRADIVARIUS, who made instruments so surpassingly good that neither for tone nor beauty of appearance have they ever been excelled. He experimented for many years, and gradually altered the shape of his instruments until he had quite forsaken the model which in his master's workshop he had been taught was the best, and produced fiddles which science demonstrates to be made of the material and in the shape most conducive to power

and purity of tone. Another Italian maker, GIUSEPPE GUARNERIUS, who lived rather later, also made violins of extraordinary worth, which, though not so elegant in appearance, are for the most part as fine in tone as those of STRADIVARIUS. The GUARNERIUS violins have a masculine strength and vigour of appearance, but lack the air of elegant refinement which is the charm of the STRADIVARIUS instruments ; but in the matter of tone there is not much to choose between them. For a long time after the death of these two men no violins were made like theirs, and their pupils and successors fell off in their craft until they seemed to have lost the art altogether, and followed it as a mere trade. The art which had died in Italy did not seem to flourish anywhere else, and no more first-class fiddles came, or ever have come, from the city or the country of STRADIVARIUS and GUARNERIUS. The fiddles of these two great artists were scattered all over Italy, and it was some considerable time before it was discovered that the peasantry of numerous towns in Italy were executing their simple dances to the music of instruments which were triumphs of art, and which were destined to make a noise in the world. It was not until the end of the last, or the beginning of this, century, that English people heard of these fiddles ; but when they did hear of them, they did as they always do—began to bid fabulous prices for a foreign article, and soon gave far more than it was worth rather than not have it at all. In the first

decade of this century, ten pounds would have bought the finest of these fiddles ; to-day they range from two hundred to a thousand guineas, and, as we have observed before, the price of the most superb "concert grand" would not nearly buy a very ordinary STRADIVARIUS violin. Fashion says that to have the best violin you must buy a "STRAD." or a "JOSEPH" ; everybody, therefore, rushes for an instrument made by one of these artists. Dealers keep them close, and are very mysterious about them : a brisk demand, as is always the case, sends up the price ; and as much as a thousand guineas has recently been paid at an auction for a fine STRADIVARIUS violin. Fashion and prejudice have combined not only to raise the price of these violins, but also to raise a huge fabric of romance and mystery, which topples to the ground when pressed by hard use and close investigation. The violins of these makers are undoubtedly magnificent art works ; we know it, and are quite willing to ascribe to these two Italians all the glory and praise which are their due ; but truth is truth, after all, and when statements are made to the effect that these makers had "a secret" which is for ever lost ; that no living maker can produce work equal to theirs ; that wood of the same quality as that which was used a century and a half ago does not now grow ; that modern brains cannot devise, nor modern skill and science execute, a violin equal in all respects to theirs —we distinctly affirm, not only that such statements

are opposed to all the dictates of common sense, but what is more to the point, they are not true.

We wish our position to be distinctly understood. We believe to the full in the power, purity, and perfection of the finest of the Italian violins ; but we deny *in toto* that the "secret" of their manufacture is lost, that they have never been equalled, or that they cannot be equalled. Such statements, we repeat, are neither in conformity with common sense nor with facts. Violins have been made in England (and also in America, if report be true) within the last few years which are not inferior, either in beauty of appearance, perfection of mechanism, or power and purity of tone, to the best instruments of Cremona. We do not make this statement on hearsay, for we have ourselves seen and played upon specimens of the instruments in question. Nor are we alone in our testimony, for we can refer to possessors of Cremonas who have compared them with the new instruments and who agree with our view. The gentleman to whom we referred, in our recent articles on "Old Violins," as having made violins of the finest quality, is MR. JOHN DAY,* who is a retired organist, and is not only an enthusiast on all matters connected with

* Since these articles were published, we have learned that MR. JOHN DAY is a well-known solo violinist, and was a pupil of the late CHARLES DE BERIOT. He has, however, retired from the profession some time ago ; he was also appointed a member of her Majesty's private band in 1847, an appointment which he still holds.

the violin, as well as a very able player on that instrument, but also a well-informed man on musical topics in general. MR. DAY has given the close study of many years to the making of violins. Admiring the tone as well as the perfect form of the best Cremonese instruments, he asked himself long ago whether it was altogether impossible to equal them, and concluded that with properly selected wood and due care, guided by scientific enthusiasm, violins might be made which should be as fine in all respects as those of STRADIVARIUS and GUARNERIUS. The immense amount of labour and perseverance needed to bring his efforts to a successful issue none but a genuine enthusiast can understand ; but that MR. DAY has achieved his aim appears to us to be beyond all question. We have before us, as we write, a magnificent violin made by him—a copy of a “JOSEPH”—and we do not hesitate to say that, if the question had not been solved elsewhere, this one violin would be sufficient to prove that the “secret” has not been lost for ever, or rather that there is no secret at all about the Cremona violins which patience, knowledge, care, perseverance, and what we have called “scientific enthusiasm,” cannot unravel. The tone of this violin is as full, round, mellow, and pure as that of any Cremona it has yet been our good fortune to hear, though we have heard many ; and we think it is only justice to make known the fact that MR. DAY, without any hope of pecuniary reward, without any intention or idea of selling his

productions, without any guide but the models of the great makers who preceded him, and without any encouragement beyond that certainty of ultimate success which the genuine artist always feels, has succeeded in making violins which, so far as we are able to judge, will in every respect bear comparison with the Cremonese instruments. The specimen we have (which MR. DAY has kindly sent to us for trial) is as fine-toned a violin as we ever heard. And when the matter is carefully and thoughtfully considered in all its bearings, without partisanship or antiquarian crookedness, we may well ask—Why not? Perhaps some of the *laudatores temporis acti* will answer.

Another English maker, whose success almost equals that of MR. DAY (and who differs from him in the fact that his success as an amateur has led him to adopt violin-making as a profession) is MR. WALTER H. MAYSON, of Manchester. We have also had an opportunity of inspecting closely the work turned out by MR. MAYSON. He does not profess to make “copies,” though the instruments of his which we have seen are made on the lines of the latest “Strad.” form. Those we saw have not yet been made a year. The back of one of these instruments is the most brilliant piece of wood we ever saw in a violin; and while the workmanship is in all respects perfect—varnish, purfling, neck, scroll, etc., all being charming in their delicacy of finish—the tone is pure, and remarkably free from “newness.”

It is more than possible that other makers have also done work in England to-day as fine as that done at Cremona a hundred and fifty years ago ; but, whether this be so or not, it is in our opinion capable of demonstration that the Cremonese work can be equalled in our own day and country, because, having seen it done, we can but say—*Ubi testimonia rerum adsunt, quid opus est verbis ?*





IV.

T

HE battle of the old and new violins has been waged as fiercely and caused as many heart-burnings as the old feud between the MONTECCHI and the CAPULETTI in ancient Verona. The main points in this controversy have been thus stated by us in a preceding chapter. The modern school assent to these propositions; the old deny most of them most vigorously. When the above articles appeared, in the *Musical Standard*, we received many angry letters, asserting emphatically that it was impossible any maker could equal STRADIVARIUS and GUARNERIUS; that modern makers could not get "the tone," though they may imitate the appearance of the old masters, and much more to the same effect. These people were so convinced on the point, so certain that no one would ever equal the Cremonese, and so prejudiced against anything new, that had a specimen of the best work of the golden age of Cremona been produced to them as the work of JOHN DAY, of London, they would have

ridiculed it as a vile imitation. But prejudice, though it can stop men's ears against the entrance of common sense, can never alter facts; and if the decriers of modern work are willing to submit to a practical test, we will suggest one for their consideration and approval. Let ten or twelve "STRADS." or "JOSEPHS" be brought together, and also one specimen by GEMUNDER, of New York, and one by JOHN DAY, of London; let all be played in succession, out of sight, and we will ask them to point out the "DAY" or the "GEMUNDER" when its turn comes. If their theory is correct, and modern work cannot be made to equal the old in quality of tone, they ought to be able to distinguish, without *possibility of error*, and without actual inspection, the new from the old. We confess we should like much to see the experiment made; and although we have not asked MR. DAY's opinion, or that of HERR GEMUNDER, on the point, we are sure neither would hesitate to submit his work to such a test. MR. GEMUNDER has written a book on this subject,* which contains some statements calculated to startle the members of the "old school" quite out of their propriety. The question will have to be settled one way or the other, for it is either true or false that violins have been made within the last ten years which have, so to speak, deceived the very elect.

We offer to "the elect," who cannot believe in old

* "George Gemünder's Progress in Violin Making." Published by the Author, price 10s.

tone being found in new fiddles, the following quotations from GEMUNDER'S book :—“ This violin was “ exhibited by me for the purpose of proving to the “ world that I can make violins that have the tone “ which has been sought for a long time since the “ death of the celebrated Italian masters, since which “ all attempts have miscarried, and I confirmed this “ fact in a circular added to it. But what was the “ result ? It was not believed. In the Exhibition “ of Vienna my violin was mistaken for a genuine “ Cremonese violin, not only for its tone, but for its “ outer appearance, which was so striking an imitation “ according to JOSEPH GUARNERIUS, that a newspaper “ of Vienna made the observation : ‘GEORGE GEMUN- “ DER cannot make us Germans believe that the “ violin sent by him is new ; a bold Yankee only can “ put his name in a genuine instrument, in order to “ make himself renowned ! ’ ”

Since the publication of the first edition we have made a trial of one of the “JOSEPH GUARINI” violins, through the courtesy of the agent, MR. HARGREAVES, of Booth Street, Piccadilly, Manchester, who sent us a specimen under circumstances which showed it was not specially selected for the purpose. JOSEPH GUARINI is a Genevan, descended from the Italian poet GUARINI (A.D. 1612), but has settled at Germigny, in the Vosges, where, in conjunction with JULES MARTIN, he is engaged in producing these specimens of the violin tribe. The joinery is perfect, the double purfling

being very delicate, and the general appearance artistic. The varnish seems somewhat unevenly laid on, but that may be a fault of this particular specimen alone, which is made on the lines of the "STRAD." flat model, with a bold and well-defined scroll. The tone is remarkable for an instrument not a year old, and one made without any attempt at producing artificial age, answering readily on the higher positions, and the quality being level throughout. It is full, sonorous, and free from *wolf*, this crucial test being satisfactorily passed. The wood is well chosen; the back-plate a beautiful specimen of natural marking. These instruments are reasonable in price, as, judging from the judicious thinness and selection of the wood, they will develop a rich and mellow tone in the shortest possible time, and will probably years hence be in considerable request. In short, these violins are first-rate examples of modern workmanship, and seem to deserve the praise that is generally accorded them. And why not?

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